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The Gilded Breath: Breathing Life into Sacred Text

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Abstract:

The art of Illumination holds a central position in the artistic tradition of Islamic culture, and a revered art form. The illuminations of different periods represent the states and spirits of those eras. This study examines the material, technical, and aesthetic foundations of illumination art with a specific focus on the aesthetics of this art. The study highlights the symbolic, spiritual, and sensory dimensions of colours and symbols in Qur'anic manuscripts.

Keywords:

Islamic Art, Illumination, Quranic Art, Quranic Illumination, Tazhib, Illuminating, Illumination Drawings, Geometric Drawings, Spiritual Nature of Motifs, Spirit Of Islamic Art

Introduction:

Embellishing religious books is an old tradition and practice. The manuscripts that are embellished are called Illuminated manuscripts. The Noble Prophet ﷺ upon whom the Qur'an was revealed was "ummi", i.e. he neither knew how to write nor how to read. And when the Angel Jibreel came and said: "Iqra". He replied: "La Aadri" i.e. I didn't know how to read and write. The Arabs, who were masters of poetry and largely distant from writing, when compelled to write down the Qur'an, said: "Since we must write the Revelation, its written form should be as pleasing to the eyes as the recitation of the Qur'an is to the ears." As Martin Lings said: "memorised record is for the ear when the verses are spoken or chanted"¹

As Islam avoids the representation of human and animal images in a religious context, Islamic arts expressed spirituality through calligraphy and the embellishment of sacred texts. It is important to emphasize that in Qur'anic art, calligraphy and ornamentation are not separate from one another; rather, both work together, integrated into the overall

¹ Lings, M. (2005). *Splendours of Qur'an calligraphy and illumination*. Liechtenstein: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation. P:15

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beauty of the page. The decoration of the Holy Qur'an is not merely for aesthetic purposes but is regarded as an expression of religious devotion. Moreover, ornamentation also assists in the recitation of the Qur'an, such as by dividing verses and indicating the places of prostration.

According to Martin Lings, because pictorial and sculptural arts are restricted in Islamic art, human creative energies began to flow within these limitations like a narrow stream—and this is how Qur'anic calligraphy and illumination came into being. Schuon (1982) likewise stated that Islamic non-figurative arts emerged because depicting humans and animals was forbidden, and that this very restriction itself became a source of a new creative dimension.²

There are two schools of thought regarding the meaning of illumination in Qur'an manuscripts. The above-mentioned view that the designs around the verses are independently constructed belongs to one school of thought. At the same time there are scholars who believe that strong conceptual connections exist between the designs and the verses.³

Word explanation:

Arabic word “zakhrafa” (ornament) is the word used for the explanation of this art. The word is connected with the noun “zukhruf” (gold, ornamental work) used in Qur'an.⁴ Another word illumination, known as “Tazhib” in Persian, has been derived from the Arabic word “Zahab” which means “gold”⁵. It consists of regular geometric and plant designs decorated with golden water and drawings, and rarely any other color has been used in it, and if apart from gold water, other colors such as sorghum, white lazuli, and zeolite, and so on are used in it, that would be called Morasa' or Tarsia' which means studded with jewels. But today, usually both Morasa' or Tarsia' is called illumination (Tazhib).⁶

² Lings, M. (2005). *Splendours of Qur'an calligraphy and illumination*. Liechtenstein: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation. P:74

³ Martin Lings elucidates this point in his book *The Qur'anic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination*. The same philosophy is also expressed by Syed Tajammul Hussain (a London based scholar) in his lecture at Lahore Museum on Hussain, S. T. (2011, August 17). *Language of Qur'an illumination* [Lecture]. Lahore Museum, Pakistan.

The topic of his lecture was Language of Quran Illumination.

⁴ *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Vol. XI). (2002). Leiden, Netherlands: Brill. P:423

⁵ Ibn Sīdah, Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Ismā'īl al-Naḥwī al-Lughawī al-Andalusī. (1996). *Al-Mukhaṣṣaṣ* [The Specialized Lexicon] (Vol. 2). Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī. P:22

⁶ Kateb, F. (2017). Spiritual art: A study of illuminated drawings. *Journal of History, Culture and Art Research*, 6(6), 221–232. <https://doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v6i6.1207>

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According to another perspective the word illumination is derived from Latin word *illuminare*, which is used to explain all type of decorations applied for the embellishment of both sacred and secular texts. The documents which display a variety of decorative symbols used for embellishment are called illuminated manuscripts. The use of gold and silver inks to give an effect of light emanating from the text made this a popular term.⁷

History:

Though it is present in different forms earlier, it is a very old and noble tradition to decorate the religious and noble books with gold and silver. This art flourished particularly in the Middle Ages in Europe and afterwards applied by Muslim artists in Qur'an manuscripts. These embellishments served to enhance the physical beauty of the text while complementing its spiritual significance.

Lindisfarne Gospels⁸, Book of Kells, Book of Durrow are some examples from lately examples of illuminated manuscripts. Hence the illumination of sacred books was known in the Eastern regions even before the advent of Islam⁹. Even this was attempted as early as the 7th century during the Prophet's life.¹⁰ However, an Abbasid-era poet, 'Izzat al-'Umayy (d. 276 AH / 890 CE), mentioned in one of his qasidas that the Arabs used to call it "al-mudhahhaba" (something adorned with gold)¹¹. Ibn 'Abd Rabbih (d. 327 AH / 939 CE) also referred to this practice. Among early authors, the first to shed light on the details of these illuminated manuscripts was Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, and after him Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī (d. 463 AH / 1071 CE) continued this discussion¹². If these accounts are accepted as accurate, it becomes clear that the Mu'allaqāt are considered among the earliest illuminated manuscripts in Arab tradition.

Significance:

⁷ Porcher, J. (1965). Miniatures and illumination. In *Encyclopedia of World Art* (Vol. X). London: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company. P:122

⁸ An illuminated manuscript that was created some time in the late 600s or 700s CE

⁹ Tawfiq, B. B. (1989). *Midād al-dhahab: Ṣinā' atuhu fī al-'uṣūr al-Islāmiyyah* [Gold ink: Its manufacture in Islamic periods]. *Majallat al-Mawrid*, V:18. P:137.

¹⁰ This was evidenced with the palimpsest folio whereby the underwritten text contained chevron patterns. The overwritten text, in early Hijāzī group of scripts, had been dated from the period of the third caliph 'Uthmān when the Quran was formally redacted in 650 AD. Mr. Tajammul Hussain have personally studied this folio under ultra violet light to discover the patterns and ornamentation underneath. Hussain, S. T. (n.d.). *Roads to paradise: The art of illumination of the Qur'an*.

¹¹ Ibn Qutaybah, Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh ibn Muslim. (1967). *Al-shi'r wa al-shu'arā'* [Poetry and poets] (Vol. 1). (A. M. Shākir, Ed.). Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif. P:252.

¹² Ibn Rashīq, Abū 'Alī al-Ḥasan al-Qayrawānī. (1955). *Al-'Umda fī ṣinā'at al-shi'r wa naqdih* [The pillar of poetic composition and criticism] (Vol. 1). (Muḥyī al-Dīn 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, Ed.). Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sa'ādah P:96.

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The illumination in Qur'anic manuscripts is rooted from the spiritual and metaphysical worldview of Islam. From the very beginning, Muslim artists and illuminators would have been conscious of hadith qudsī: "God is Beautiful and loves beauty." These sayings establish a metaphysical foundation for sacred art, emphasizing both divine self-disclosure and the intrinsic relationship between beauty and the Divine.

For the artist and illuminator, the act of decorating the sacred text is not merely an aesthetic aspire but a response to this Divine desire for manifestation. Historically, many master calligraphers and illuminators followed the esoteric path of Islam known as Sufism, which focuses on the inner meanings of the faith. In the context of Qur'anic illumination, artists expressed Qur'anic themes visually through a symbolic and non-figurative language. These themes included representations of the Divine Throne, often symbolized by the eight-pointed star; the heavenly origin of the Quran, suggested through palmette motifs resembling trees extending toward the heavens; symbolic references to the seven heavens; and visual allusions to paradise, which is a central theme of the Quran.

Purification, a central concept in Islam and Sufism, exists on two levels: outward and inward. Just as prayer requires purification of the body, gnosis requires purification of the heart. Water used for ritual purification must be clean, just as belief must be undefiled and unification pure. The Sufis emphasize that outward and inward purification must proceed together. As noted by Hujwīrī in *Kashf al-Mahjoub*, the process of creation is inextricably linked to the concept of "double purification." Just as the ritual of prayer requires the outward purification of the body through water, the act of gnosis (spiritual knowledge) requires the inward purification of the heart¹³. The master illuminator, often an initiate of the Sufi path, views their craft as a ritual where the washing of the hands corresponds to a purging of worldliness, and the focus on the page represents a turning away from all familiar objects toward the Divine.

The non-figurative designs surrounding Qur'anic verses reflect the core Islamic principle of tawhīd, the affirmation of divine unity and transcendence. These abstract forms avoid figuration and instead emphasize harmony, order, and balance, reinforcing the centrality of God above all created forms.

The importance accorded to books and knowledge in the Muslim world between the 9th and 18th centuries highlights the prominence of the art of the book without diminishing other artistic expressions. Oliver Leaman has critically addressed common misconceptions surrounding Islamic art and has drawn attention to its multiple

¹³ Hujwīrī, 'Alī ibn 'Uthmān. (n.d.). *Kashf al-mahjūb* trans. Nicholson, R.A., Leiden 1911, repr. Lahore

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dimensions.¹⁴ One such misconception is the tendency to classify Islamic art solely as religious.¹² ¹⁵ Rather, Islamic art encompasses intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic concerns that extend beyond narrow definitions.

In Qur'anic manuscripts, illumination serves to complement the sacred text rather than dominate it. The illuminated borders function as frames, while the blank spaces surrounding them enhance visual clarity and balance. Together, the text, illumination, and empty space form a tripartite composition in which all elements are harmonized. This visual harmony reflects the broader spiritual teachings of Islam, which emphasize balance and integration in both religious practice and daily life. In this sense, Qur'anic illumination may be understood as a form of spiritual art.

The Emergence of Illumination in Qur'anic Manuscripts:

The Qur'ans produced during the era of the Caliphs, particularly under the supervision Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddiq (RA) and Hazrat Uthman (RA), strictly adhered to the original text, without any additions. These manuscripts became the official standard for the Muslim community. In the first century Hijri, introducing non-Qur'anic elements into copies was strongly discouraged. Scholars would have been very strict in this matter, because for them the addition of something in the Qur'an was considered a deviation from the Sunnah of the Prophet:

"Do not mix anything with the Quran that is not part of it."¹⁶

Ibn Abi Dawood quoted statements from prominent Companions, including Hazrat Abu Darda, Hazrat Ubayy ibn Kaab, and Hazrat Abu Hurairah, indicating that adorning mosques or Qur'ans could invite "Adbar" (i.e. fall).¹⁷

Early Period: Caliphs Region

The Musaf that was written during the reign of Caliph Abu Bakr, or the Musaf that was sent to the Ansar, was devoid of any trace of gold. One reason for this may be that the early Muslims practiced piety, abstained from worldly adornment, and preferred jihad and sacrifice to raise the flag of Islam. Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab took a number of practical steps to strengthen these meanings. An example of this came when he ordered during the expansion of the Prophet's Mosque that the walls should not be decorated with red and yellow colours, so as not to distract the attention of the worshipper from worship.¹⁸

¹⁴ Leaman, O. (2004). *Islamic aesthetics: An introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

¹⁵ Ibid, 15

¹⁶ Ibn Abī Dāwūd. (n.d.). *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif* (Vol. 4). Beirut: Mu'assasat Ghirās lil-Nashr wa al-Tawzī'.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid (v. 5)-

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The earliest visible signs of the Qur'an were the black dots, which were used for the signalling pauses or separations between verses¹⁹. Although scholars debated their exact significance. Their goal wasn't just beauty. Rather, it was clearly to signify the end of the Surah and the beginning of a new Surah.

Middle Period: Umayyad Region

The decoration of Qur'ans became increasingly popular during the early Umayyad era, coinciding with greater refinement in calligraphy. This process of imitation not only enhanced the aesthetic beauty but also created an interest in the purchase of these artifacts, and Qur'ans began to be sold commercially.

Later, the process of beautifying the Quran was not limited to the use of gold, but going beyond that, silver was also used, which adorned the pages of the Quran. Some prominent Islamic scholars allowed the decoration of Qur'ans with precious materials. One of them was Imam Malik ibn Anas, a renowned jurist from Hijaz, who permitted the use of gold and silver for this purpose. He even owned a Qur'an adorned with silver²⁰. Abd al-Rahman ibn Ziyad, who was the governor in Khorasan of the Umayyad Caliph Mu'awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan (ruled: 41-60 AH / 661-679 AD), sold his Mus'haf,²¹ which was decorated with silver, to meet his financial needs when he was deposed, suggesting that these precious materials were planted in such a way that they could be separated from the pages of the Quran.

Late period: Abbasid Region

During the Abbasid era, a cultural awakening emerged, and the arts flourished under the caliphs' patronage. Artists competed creatively, and book decoration with gold became a prominent art form and was given special attention.

Quranic manuscripts saw increased decorative elements, with novelists adding spaces between surahs for artists to fill with scenic strips. Initially, these strips were in the form of irregular rectangles, as in the manuscript preserved in the museum of "Tope Kapi Sarai."²² Ibn al-Nadim's book "Al-Fihrist" is one of the most important sources that explicitly mention the masters of this great art in the Abbasid era including Abu Musa al-

¹⁹ Ettinghausen, R. (n.d.). *Fan al-taṣwīr 'inda al-'Arab* [The art of painting among the Arabs]. Baghdad: Maṭba'at al-Adab al-Baghdādiyyah. P:167

²⁰ Al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn. (n.d.). *Al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* [Perfection in the sciences of the Qur'an] (Vol. 3). P:165

²¹ Al-Jahshiyārī, Abū 'Abd Allāh. (n.d.). *Kitāb al-wuzarā' wa al-kuttāb* [The book of viziers and secretaries]. Cairo: Maṭba'at Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa Awlāduh. P:17-18

²² Al-Munjid, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn. (1979). *Dirāsāt fī tārikh al-khaṭṭ al-'Arabī mundhu bidāyatih ilā nihāyat al-'aṣr al-Umawī* [Studies in the history of Arabic calligraphy from its beginnings to the end of the Umayyad period] (2nd ed.). Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd. P:58-60

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Ammar, Ibn al-Saqtī, Ibrahim al-Saghir, and his son Muhammad²³. These artists used various materials, including botanical compounds, metals, and minerals, to embellish Quranic manuscripts with gold and silver.²⁴

The historical advancement in Quranic Illumination:

The Qur'anic illumination evolves from simple motifs such as circles and dots to elaborate geometric and floral frames showcases the skill and devotion of Muslim artists. These embellishments served to enhance the physical beauty of the text while complementing its spiritual significance.

The earliest designs applied in the text were in the form of circles, line endings, coloured dots and simple geometrical shapes used as āya markers.²⁵ In the preliminary manuscripts the surah separation was indicated by a decorated band (Fig.1) or crosses placed at the end of a line. Gradually this became elaborate and in late middle period the sūra headings started to be written within decorated bands.



Fig.1

An embellishment used for surah separation. Quran from 1st or 2nd century A.H. Present location; Topkapi Museum. Istanbul. Turkey (www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Text/Mss/topkapi.html. 2008.)

This space can also indicate the number of verses called ayah. The verses constitute the main body of the text. The ending of each verse is thus indicated by some kind of decoration simple or elaborate. In the margins the division of the sections is indicated as quarter (ruba), half (nisf), three quarter (thuth), and prostration (Sajda). These points were indicated with motifs both simple and elaborate as shown in Fig.2.

²³ Ibn al-Nadīm. (n.d.). *Al-Fihrist* [The catalogue]. Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifah. P:14

²⁴ ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, ‘Izz al-Dīn. (n.d.). *Al-bardī wa al-raqq* [Papyrus and parchment]. Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif. P:43

²⁵ The Quran manuscripts discovered from a mosque in San‘a Yemen in 1972 display simple geometrical forms used as āya markers. Carbon testing has proved these manuscripts to have been written in 7th and 8th centuries A.D.

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Fig.2.

Qur'ān manuscript produced in 391/1000 at Baghdad. Sheila S, Blair. *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP. 2006) 163. Print

Gradually the disjointed ornamentation took the shape of regular bands and borders which are placed around the text box (Fig.3). Along with these points the first two pages are some times heavily decorated.



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Fig.3.

Qur'an on parchment. Nasser D, Khalili. Islamic Art and Culture. A Visual History (New York: The Overlook Press, 2005) 51. Print.

Variations in Quranic Illumination:

Illumination in the manuscripts can be categorized as two forms, in-text decorations and out-text decorations. The in-text decorations are used as ayah markers or dividers and surah headings. They include small roundels or rosette used as verse endings. Geometrical, abstract and floral shapes are used for this purpose. Because they are the most commonly used devices in an illuminated Qurān manuscript; a rather simple rendition is used for the application of design.

The out-text decorations are applied in frontispieces, Finispieces, decorative frames around the main text box, linear designs behind the written words and in the margins as indicators of important reading points. The out of text decoration in the form of frames and borders are reflective of the regional styles. This category also includes frontispieces and finispieces. Another type of out of text decoration is found in the form of marginal decorations which are standardized to some extent. They consist of motifs which are used for the indication of reading points in the Quran manuscripts.

Besides out of text and in-text decoration, there is integrated decoration used in illuminated manuscripts. This category can be found in the abstract patterns placed in the interlinear spaces between the verses and illumination applied around the surah headings. Even at the early stage the design is derived from architectural sources, which shows the emergence of an individual Muslim style. Use of marginal decorations and patterns applied as background of text emerged in the late period. Such developments indicate to the gradual refinement of the art of illumination in Quran manuscripts.

The study of illumination in Qur'anic manuscripts reveal that there is indeed use of principles of designs, intentional or unintentional, but a strict adherence to any one of them is not visible. In illumination geometry, for example is not always the prime element of design construction. The application of geometrical designs varied from place to place. For example, Mamluk Qur'ans, display a rich use of geometrical concepts as is visible in their architecture also. On the other hand, In the Indian Subcontinent geometry plays as the underlying framework and is not visibly prominent. The reliance is more on floral forms In Iranian illumination but these forms are constructed according to strict

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geometrical precision. This is the main difference between the Iranian and Indian style of illumination.²⁶

Similarly, the use of colour also varies from region to region. A set method of colour application cannot be detected. As far as the aesthetic development of the art of illumination is concerned, the use of ornamentation in architecture has to be studied closely. Many elements of architectural ornamentation have been incorporated in the illumination designs applied in Qur'an manuscripts.

Significance of elements used in Illumination:

The geometric patterns, plant designs and even the use of colours holds special meanings in them. Geometric shapes act as vessels for spiritual concepts. In this tradition, the numbers three and nine are associated with Heaven, while the number four represents the Earth and its four cardinal points. The number five is symbolic of Man, whereas the six-pointed star (hexagon) represents the Perfect Man (al-insān al-kāmil), a link established by the numerical value of the Arabic letter Waw²⁷.

The eight-pointed star signifies the Throne of Heaven, a connection rooted in Quran 69:17 "On the Day of Judgement, His Throne will be carried by eight angels" and the mystical diagrams of Ibn Arabi in al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya. Temporal cycles are captured by the twelve-pointed star, which represents the rhythm of the day, night, and year and finally, the sixteen-pointed star illustrates the Stations of Enlightenment (maqāms) of the human soul, as found on the kursī (manuscript stand) of Sultan Qāyṭbay. The usage of seven distinct frames in the frontispieces explicitly represents the seven heavens mentioned in the Quran.

Inspired by Ibn Arabi's eight-pointed star (the Divine Throne), the building's layout—including the chārbāgh (four-part garden)—serves as an "esoteric prayer" for the soul's admission into paradise (Ibn Arabi, al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya).

Similarly, flowers especially lotus is most commonly used in this art. It is said that "The lotus is the symbol of absolute purity; it grows from the dark watery mire but is untainted or unstained by it."²⁸ It also symbolizes the Tawhid as it blooms only once on a single branch. The White Lotus symbolized spiritual evolution, while the Blue Lotus—which closes at night and opens at sunrise—symbolized creation, rebirth, and the resurrection of

²⁶ Tahir, R. (n.d.). *Illuminated beauty: The art, philosophy, and aesthetic value of Qur'an manuscript embellishment*.

²⁷ Lings, M. (2005). *Splendours of Qur'an calligraphy and illumination*. Liechtenstein: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation. P:42

²⁸ Sheppard, W.: Symbolism of the lotus flower, <http://www.vagabondjourney.com/90-ch005-lotus-flower-symbolism.shtml>

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the soul²⁹. The lotus is "the flower of flowers," representing the plane of reflection of the "Celestial Ray"³⁰. The usage of geometry solved the paradox of how to represent Perfection/Wholeness (attributes of Paradise) while maintaining Infinitude. By using centrifugal designs that overlap barriers, the artist forces the eye to move beyond the page, suggesting the infinite³¹.

In colours, Gold, Blue and Red is most commonly seen in the manuscripts. Generally, these are the primary colours used in Quran illumination but then there are overarching reasons for the usage of both gold and blue: blue is the colour of heavens and the Quran is brought down by descent (tanzīl). Here it is necessary to refer to the late Dr Lings whose descriptions on usage of colour symbolism have not been bettered: "Blue is the colour of the Infinite which is identical with Mercy, for 'My Mercy embraced all things' (Sūrat al-Arāf, Q 7:156). The great symbol of this Infinitude is the all-surrounding sky." Closely related to one of the attributes of God al-Raḥmān is the name al-Muḥīt, the all-Embracing, and by extension, the word muḥīt also means ocean. Gold is also mentioned several times in connection with the objects that are part of the gardens of paradise.

These are goblets of gold or bracelets of gold worn by the inhabitants of paradise as in Sūrat al-Ḥajj (Q 22), for instance, so it is not surprising that it has been extensively used for Quran illumination. Blue and gold are opposite enough to enhance each other greatly. However, in the triple domain of primary colour "perfect balance cannot come by two but only by three."³² Thus, to enhance the blue and gold, there has been usage of red like the "rubies and coral" of the maidens in paradise (Sūrat al-Raḥmān, Q 55:58). At times, red is applied with a soft brush over gold so that the radiance of gold is rendered ethereal as it shines through the red pigment.

Gold can be used either as gold leaf or crushed gold leaves. This technique required pounding gold leaves with gum Arabic and then filtering with water in order to obtain fine gold powder. The water was thereafter drained or steamed-off with the residue (gold powder bound with gum Arabic) then placed on a seashell, therefore the name shell-gold (as it came to be known) which was used with water and brush for very fine work. This technique required burnishing with an agate tooth to render its brilliance, which is not necessary for gold leaf as it is applied directly to the surface with gum Arabic or glair (egg white) as a fixative.

²⁹ Tyldesley, J.: The Private Lives of the Pharaohs, London 2000. P:171

³⁰ Guenon, R.: Fundamental Symbols, Lahore 2001. P:54

³¹ Lings, M. (2005). *Splendours of Qur'an calligraphy and illumination*. Liechtenstein: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation. P:42

³² Ibid.P: 29

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To enhance the brilliance of gold, once the ink or paint has completely dried, a polished agate stone is gently rubbed over the surface. This process generates warmth and pressure, smoothing the gold and imparting a radiant, mirror-like sheen.

The blue colour was obtained by crushing the lapis lazuli stone imported from modern-day Afghanistan. As the stone was imported and is a very hard stone to crush, there was considerable expense in using it. The crushed lapis stone was used, at times, with black (obtained from soot) and mixed with gum and water to form the deep Egyptian blue (a form of Prussian blue pigment) which the Mamluks favoured. A shiny white paint is found. It is highly probable that this was obtained by crushing pearls in order to obtain this pearlescent finish. Red pigment was also used and this colour is the most vivid of colours “as it produces the maximum vibrations in the eye. It is also a symbol of fire and it is significant that for Moses, the first sign of the Presence of Jehovah was the burning bush.”³³

Even in present, illuminators prefer to prepare and use colours derived from natural materials. Blue and red pigments are still produced using nearly the same traditional methods. Substances such as honey, saffron, vinegar, glycerine, and rose water are incorporated into the preparation of these colours. Their production requires several months, during which the artist carefully employs natural materials to achieve the desired hues.

Red pigment was produced from cinnabar (arsenic sulphide), which was widely known and highly prized in the markets of Baghdad. Cinnabar sourced from western regions was considered superior in quality. The mineral was ground with water or vinegar until fully dissolved; dissolved gum Arabic was then added and thoroughly mixed. The mixture was thickened and prepared for writing and illumination. Red was also obtained from Iraqi ochre (maghrah al-‘Irāqiyyah).

Black ink is prepared by grinding charcoal into a fine powder. The powder is soaked in twice its amount of water; gradually, the pigment settles at the bottom, forming a paste, while the water rises to the surface. The excess water is gently poured off, and gum Arabic is mixed into the paste until fully dissolved. The ink is then ready for use. Water and glycerine may be added to thin the ink as needed. Glycerine helps maintain fluidity; however, excessive use prevents the ink from drying properly and must therefore be used with care.

³³ Ibid. P: 32

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Yellow pigment is made from a naturally occurring form of iron oxide, mixed with water and gum Arabic to create a smooth ink. In some cases, turmeric is also used to achieve the desired shade.

Green is produced by combining iron and sulphur compounds (iron sulphate). These materials are slowly dissolved in water and then blended with gum Arabic to form a usable pigment.

Conclusion:

The art of illumination is not only a decorative element to the Qur'anic text but also an integral visual language that reflects reverence, discipline, and spiritual intentionality. Each pigment, whether derived from stone, earth, or precious metal, carries both aesthetic and symbolic significance, contributing to a harmonious visual order that enhances the contemplative experience of the manuscript.

The intricate designs, symbolism, and spiritual significance all point to the profound impact of Islam on art and culture. The persistence of these techniques in contemporary illumination practices reveals a living tradition sustained through apprenticeship, patience, and fidelity to inherited knowledge. Ultimately, the study of illumination and its related elements deepen our understanding of Islamic art as a synthesis of beauty, devotion, and intellectual discipline.

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